

Missouri River Called Endangered

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Omaha World-Herald
Wednesday, April 11, 2001

Lincoln - For the second time in five years, the Missouri River has been ranked the nation's most endangered river by a national river-conservation group.

American Rivers, which is to release its 16th annual rankings today, said the Missouri's listing focuses on the impacts the operation of six large dams in the Dakotas and Montana have on fish and wildlife.

With the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is set to release this summer a new proposal for managing the river, this could be the last chance Americans have to influence river operations, said Chad Smith, an American Rivers official based in Lincoln.

"This really is kind of a watershed moment for the Missouri River," Smith said. "This is when the public is going to have a chance to make its voice heard concerning the future of the Missouri River."

Considerable attention also is being focused on the river with growing interest in riverfront redevelopment in Omaha and Council Bluffs and with the coming bicentennial of Lewis and Clark's explorations on the river.

After releasing its preferred plan, the corps plans to devote six months to public hearings and workshops.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has told the corps that the river needs an increase in spring flows below Gavins Point Dam near Yankton, S.D., followed by a decrease in summer flows.

The wildlife agency, American Rivers and others see the flow regimes as crucial for native river fish, including the endangered pallid sturgeon, and to sandbar-nesting birds such as the endangered least tern and the threatened piping plover.

The corps' plans so far have not included flow changes on the lower river, saying restoring habitat along the lower Missouri and other steps will help improve the health of the river and its species.

Farmers, navigators and others on the lower river, however, object to such changes in river flows. The high spring flows would prevent farm fields from draining, they say, and the summer low would harm river shipping and remove the competition needed to keep rail rates reasonable.

Duane Hovorka, executive of the Nebraska Wildlife Federation, said restoring habitat is only half the answer.

The suggested changes in flows make only minor changes in river management and would have minor economic impacts, he said.

Conservation groups long have argued that the economic benefits of barge shipping on the river are minimal, particularly when compared with the multimillion-dollar recreation industry on upstream reservoirs. That industry could be expanded on the lower river with a more natural waterway.

Paul Johnston, a spokesman for the corps in Omaha, said the conservation groups are trying to influence the political process just like other groups.

The corps got a letter from nine Mississippi River governors who don't want the corps to make Missouri flow changes because of concerns about their impact on Mississippi shipping, Johnston said.

And, five upper Missouri River basin governors want to make sure the corps evaluates the impacts of flow changes on hydropower generation. The dams produce a lot of low-cost electricity for the region. Studies done for the corps indicate that the fish and wildlife agency's proposal would result in a loss of \$30 million a year in hydropower revenues.

Other rivers in the group's top five, in their order of listing, are the Canning River in Alaska, the Eel River in California, the Hudson River in New York and the Powder River in Wyoming and Montana.